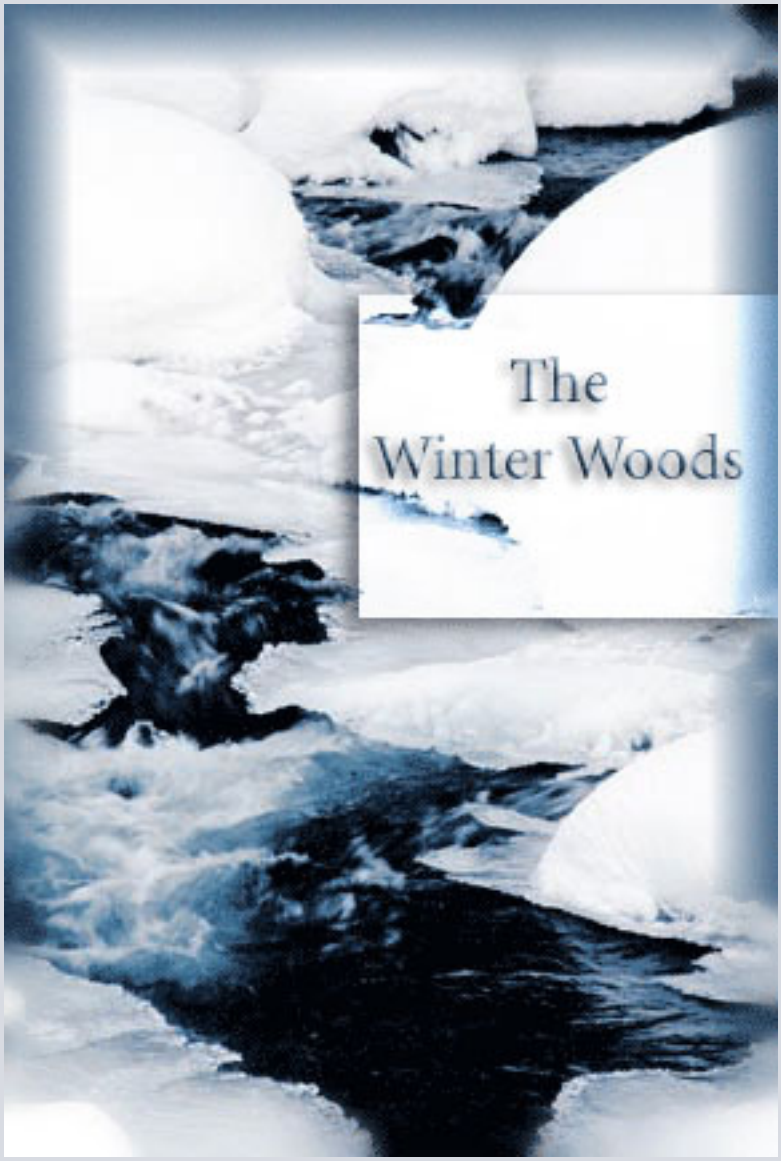
The TENNESSEE CONSERVATIONIST



Text by LinnAnn Welch and Photos by Frances Dorris

For many naturalists, the winter woods hold as much mystery, beauty, and personality as its more vibrant spring counterpart.

Not only is there much, biologically speaking, happening in the dead of winter, but an explorer can experience a more intimate relationship with individual trees and features without the distraction of a massive number of green leaves.

Visitors to the January woods can view vistas and learn more of the topography of the landscape. Quiet hikers can catch glimpses of wildlife such as reclining deer and retreating Barred Owls. Clear, algae-free streams and ponds offer views of aquatic life such as schools of fish or turtles seeking a moment in the winter sun. Patches of snow or mud holes speak volumes on the local residents from the tracks remaining from their passing. Persistent herbaceous foliage not only offers food for the woods' fauna but for the soul of those counting the days until winter breaks and favorite ephemeral wildflowers visit once again to bless us for a brief moment of time.

Did you know that winter woods, particularly those areas located deep within and protected by hills or mountains, provide shelter for wildflower foliage and late or early flowers? Although regularly used trails may not indicate much plant life, those off-the-trail spots often are great places to find persistent columbine, Grape Ferns, Wood Poppy, phacelia, or Jacob's-Ladder.

Often late January or at least February is the time for the reemergence of early flowering plants. One may be fortunate enough to see a flowering hepatica, Harbinger-of-Spring, Spring Beauty, or Bloodroot. It is also the time, in those protected areas, for summer plants to emerge and

begin the growth of leaves that will be quite large by the time the summer sun is warming the canopy. Emerging summer foliage includes Bears-foot Sunflower, Leafcup, goldenrod, and various wild mints.

Many animals go through winter dormancy, if not an actual hibernation, thus the reason for fewer wildlife sightings in the dead of winter.

As a visitor passes through the winter woods, he or she is surrounded by thousands of creatures that are awaiting spring beneath the leaf litter of the forest floor. Metabolic processes have decreased in response to shorter days and cool temperatures. Most amphibians such as frogs, toads, and salamanders, remain hidden in mud or deep within the leaf litter. This is true of many snakes and turtles as well. Often box turtle shells from deceased individuals are found when digging through the leaves along a fence or trail. If a hibernating animal does not bury himself deep enough, extreme cold and freezing temperatures may cause his death. Mammals often hole up in hollow trees or a den in the ground or rock structure. Snakes of several species may all lie together within the protection of a rock shelter.

Many birds travel south for the winter, but others call Tennessee their home year-round. Human habitations offer yard birds protection from the chill of winter, but often species such as owls, hawks, and thrushes, prefer the deep woods when available. Eastern Redcedar trees and thickets offer an evergreen shelter for these species and many others. Cedar boughs keep snow off of the birds and conceal them from predators.

Thousands of Tennesseans suffer depression in the winter due to less sunlight hours, but few realize part of the problem is due to an increased detachment from nature. As an armchair society, it is easier to view nature on a screen than to put on the proper clothing, leave the shelter of a dwelling, and reconnect with the natural world as our ancestors lived for generations. When I start suffering from the winter blues, I find myself breathing fresh, crisp air on some nameless game trail in some nameless forest. Suddenly, the pressures of the day seem trite and problems small when compared to the complex lives of the forest.

A great winter trail, one of the very best, is in one of our own Tennessee State Parks. The three-quarter mile Jim Bailey Trail at Montgomery Bell State Park in Dickson is quite diverse, even in the still of winter. Evergreen foliage such as that of Christmas Fern, Allegheny Spurge (Pachysandra), hepatica, crossvine, and Spotted Wintergreen are prolific along the path and it seems as if you’re not even on a winter trail for all the green. An abundance of winter wildlife is often encountered as one ascends the trail to cross upon the ridgetop. Brown creepers can be seen spiraling around tree trunks in search of insects hidden in crevices of furrowed bark while White-throated Sparrows call from the thickets below. Giant old White Oaks reach towards the sky along the peak of the trail and reveal more of their personalities as they are starkly outlined against the winter sky. Abundant masts of acorns beneath their strong limbs entice squirrels, chipmunks, turkeys, and deer, to seek for the trees and stay close by.

Snow and ice covering Nashville’s Radnor Lake in the natural area entice River Otters, newly returned to the lake, to leave the warmth of the lakeside woods to scurry and slide across the frozen waters. For a couple of days in January 2001, tracks of running otters could be seen on the snow-covered ice. They abruptly changed to slide lines as the otters used the frozen water for wintertime fun. Strange how animals share our human need for amusement. Meanwhile,

back off the beaten trail, a Bobcat tracked a rabbit through the snow back to its den, leaving us a clue to his reclusive presence and a glimpse of his daily habits.

Other Tennessee State Parks, such as Fall Creek Falls or South Cumberland, have trails leading to beautiful, inspiring vistas with views of freezing waterfalls and stark tree canopies for miles in many directions. Reelfoot Lake's winter woods are composed of Baldcypress whose pneumatophores, or erect roots, emerge from the marshy land to compose myriads of shapes and designs in frozen water.

Poet Robert Frost was so enchanted with the winter woods that he wrote a beloved poem about them, in which they are described as "lovely, dark, and deep." Wintry woods hold as much intrigue and mystery for us today, especially since the passing of each decade finds them farther and fewer between.

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